Contemporary Arabic Literature (١١)

AHMAD BAHGAT

RAMADAN DIARY

Translated by

NERMEEN A. HASSAN

Revised and Introduced by

M. ENANI

KOTB.

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INTRODUCTION

Ahmad Bahgat occupies a unique position among modern Arab writers. As a journalist who contributes a daily column to **Al-Ahram**, the Cairene daily with the widest circulation in the Arab world, he has managed to maintain a high level of interest in his work by striking a balance between the high seriousness of his writing on Islam and the sense of humour which enlivens his social criticism. It is, in fact, difficult to exaggerate his influence : a writer who presents fresh and «enlightened» ideas on a subject as beset with difficulties and misunderstandings as the relevance of religion to the modern world, who can reach the common man by speaking his language, and who can maintain a tone of «poetic wonder» even when dealing with apparently «prosaic» topics, is bound to have a vast following.

Bahgat's faith in the relevance of Islam to today's world

relies on those concepts which it shares with other revealed religions but which are being increasingly ignored by the «multitude» who, owing to the current methods of teaching religion which he sees as defective, seem to see nothing in religion beyond the physical forms of worship. Bahgat accepts these forms, no doubt, but he digs deep in search of the meaning and implications of each, his field being the spirit, and his scene of action the soul of man. Though comparable in this to Mustafa Mahmoud, he takes a distinctively individual line. Mahmoud's approach is to show that the discoveries of modern science confirm the existence of a universal mind, that the Creator can be seen in His creation, and that the 'cold eye of reason' is capable of perceiving what the heart feels to exist. Bahgat does not venture into this area at all, believing that the 'living heart' of man is enough, and that modern man can discover for himself the beauty and true warmth of religion through feeling. By reposing so much trust in man's innate powers — intuition, introspection and feeling — Bahgat expects each individual to be true to himself, implying that this will allow him the full exercise of his mental powers. In other words, man's intellect is regarded as the servant of the heart; and it is the heart that both leads to communion with God and dictates the moral sense. Hence the extraordinary emphasis placed by Bahgat on truthfulness and his relentless attack on hypocrisy.

In this sense, Bahgat is a moralist ; but he is a modern moralist who recognizes human weakness and even sympathizes with it. He can soar to lofty pinnacles of poetry when he deals with a purely religious subject, as he does in his **Mystic Seas of Love,** but he prefers the realism of the down-

to-earth anecdote, with men's foibles as his immediate concern. His style is therefore necessarily different from that of the professional «Islamic» writers (the Moslem clergy who deal in cliches and only repeat what they read in books on Quranic exegesis) and from Mustafa Mahmoud's rational, discursive, often abstract style (1). For Bahgat's style appears to follow naturally from the real-life situations he focuses on; and you often feel that he simply writes as he thinks, that his performance on paper is not just a reflection of his thought processes but actually a living thought process. That is why he is never dogmatic, never giving ready-made answers but only asking the questions which he feels must arise naturally from the situations he handles — and a heuristic style, by definition, invites the reader to share in the thought process and think for himself.

But it is on account of his peculiar sense of humour that I regard Ahmad Bahgat a serious enough writer ! Paradoxical as this may sound, the fact is that his sense of humour turns his social criticism into satire of the very first order. And Bahgat's satire, which the present selection from his **Diary of a Fasting Moslem** (here given the title of **Ramadan Diary**) clearly demonstrates, is as calm and subtle as any of the advanced varieties in world literature. His humour is definitely all his own and cannot be confused with that of the professional humourists, but it is essentially Egyptian — a statement which requires a little explanation.

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(1) Mahmoud can in fact be poetic and his style is often highly literary. Cf. his *Marxism and Islam*, Cairo, 1977, and *The Quran : an attempt at a modern reading*, Cairo, 1984, both done into English by M. Enani.

I have touched elsewhere (1) upon the special brand of Egyptian humour which shares the standard features of world humour and relies on the same technical devices (such as overstatement, understatement, the incongruous, burlesque, grotesque etc.) but differs in employing those flights of fancy to which a frustrated or deprived person might resort. Like all jokes, the typical Egyptian joke is closely related to its cultural matrix and, owing to historical circumstances, the typical Egyptian mind has always resorted to fantasy to compensate for the sordid reality it has to accept. A government employee may in any country object to the despotism of his superiors at work, especially his immediate boss : he may complain, he may quarrel with him, and he may even feel forced to resign. In Egypt a government employee may do, of course, any or all of these things ; but a typical reaction is, especially if he is helpless to stand up to him in reality, to resort to fantasy. He may indulge in imaginary conversations with his boss, getting the better of him all the time, but, occasionally, he may use his sense of humour in creating ridiculous images of him and may, in his mind's eyes, put him in most embarrassing situations. This often comes to the surface, with the employee cracking jokes about his boss with his colleagues, giving him names indicative of the bad qualities he and his colleagues may like to attack ; but sometimes the employee keeps his fancies to himself totally until one day (and this is by no means rare) obsessions are formed and serious psychological disturbances follow. Some of the fancies, aired or bottled up, contain original «metaphors» and are, truly,

(1) «Introduction» to Gamal El-Ghitany's *Incidents in Zafrani Alley*, Cairo, 1986, p. 17.

highly imaginative. Egyptians have used this **weapon,** down the centuries, in fighting their unjust rulers, native or foreign ; and the **joke,** as recent studies have shown, has always contributed to the creation of certain potent trends in public opinion. The deep- seated tendency of the Egyptian mind to create ridiculous, sometimes appallingly grotesque pictures of people and things accounts for certain colourful expression in the Egyptian vernacular — those metaphors which have become idiomatic through long use, both old (such as referring to a stupid person as a plank, to a deceived husband as a bucket) and new (referring to a wife as «the government» or «the ministry of the interior», calling a million pounds a «rabbit» because it reproduces very fast). Similar metaphors exist, no doubt, in all languages, and the human mind never ceases to produce parallel images, but it is the **extent** to which the Egyptian humour relies on fantasy that characterizes the Egyptian variety. In other words, a typical Egyptian joke may not differ **in kind** from a European or an American one, but, if truly Egyptian, it will be found to differ in the degree to which it makes use of fantasy.

Now Ahmad Bahgat is a typical Egyptian and in real life never ceases to exercise his rich imagination in looking at things. I recall that one day, back in the 1970's when the so-called «Public Transport Crisis» reached unprecedented proportions, he wrote that one way of dealing with the crisis was for the Prime Minister to issue instructions to all government employees to walk to the government offices nearest to their homes and, as civil servants hardly did any work at all, the «official» machine could not in the least suffer but the Cairo transport system would be healthy again !

It is the kind of joke you might expect anywhere in the world, but the serious tone which he used actually forced people to think ! It was painful because it was in many ways «relevant», that is, having a strange sense of reality about it. Indeed, not many years after Bahgat's suggestion, most government offices today take a long weekend (Friday and Saturday instead of only Friday) and Sunday remains a holiday for «public sector» shops, while on Thursday many civil servants simply do not turn up for work. And the irony is that the new arrangement has been made «as part of an effort to deal with the public transport crisis» ! I often recall that humorously serious suggestion, together with many others by Bahgat, though not in print, as indicative of the way an imaginative mind works in the humorous vein. The fact that the BUS seems to occupy a prominent place in the present book is not without significance : at one time, being on the bus meant being a member of a community on wheels — a complete set of people who take the same bus everyday, practically at the same time, to work. A European reader may perhaps think of the commuter trains which take people from suburbia to the centre of town and back, but nothing could be more different; for here the passengers knew each other, talked with each other about personal matters which are never discussed in public in Europe, and if you were a stranger, you could overhear stories of the most intimate type, and your views might even be solicited on this matter or that. After the rush hour, when a motley crowd took the bus and did not know each other, things happened that had special significance and were the subject of small talk, sometimes serious talk, in the evening : love stories began or end-

ed (1) old friends met and chatted, people's pockets were picked and girls' bottoms pinched ! Most important, of course, was the overcrowdedness which made it inevitable for men to touch women or at least to look at them at close quarters — which Islam frowns upon. While the «Ramadan Offender» episode illustrates «Life on the BUS» in Egypt (though it takes place in a tramway carriage) the question whether fasting Moslems are allowed to take the bus, which arises in the course of another episode, refers to the «unpleasant» aspects of bus-riding in those days (which have not completely disappeared).

Bahgat's humour must be distinguished, I believe, from that of the professional humourists, notably Ahmad Ragab and the late Muhammad Afifi. Unlike Art Buchwald, to compare him with a figure of world fame, Afifi was hardly ever topical. He never bothered, in fact, about politics and his orignial collections of humorous articles (2) deal with universal human situations. He could also turn his hand, not unsuccessfully, to the long narrative (3) in which the main device is irony, apart from local colour — those peculiar little details which become most memorable in him because freshly observed and originally treated. Ahmad Ragab is likewise a fully-fledged humourist who has written plays, a collection of short anecdotes, parodies and, recently, a collection of witty articles each dealing with a single theme, his favourite being

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(1) Cf. Sabri Moussa's *The Incident*, Cairo, 1987.

(2) *Grim Laughs and Very Grim Laughs*, neither done into English.

(3) *The Apple and the Skull*, not translated into English.

the hen-pecked husband or the dominant female (1). He is most famous, however, for his quips which depend almost totally on the punch line. He provides the cartoonist Mustafa Hussein with material for three daily cartoons in the Cairene daily Al-Akhbar. The first deals with the recurrent theme of the bad singer (symbolic of the present generation of mediocre musicians) the second with a humorous relationship between man and woman fancifully portrayed, under the fixed title «Love is ..»but the third, the main daily cartoon, pokes fun at certain incongruities of life in Egypt through a parade of ridiculous types.

Bahgat is not a humourist in this sense at all. His witty satires have developed over the years to constitute an almost new genre. What I described earlier as his imaginative power may be alternatively defined as an incessant attempt to seek fresh angles of looking at a reality which he seems to feel cannot be very real ! The poet in him rejects what the objective eye must see, and his inveterate passion for idealism drives him perpetually towards fresh visions and, in the process, some time-honoured, socially accepted and firmly established norms break down to reveal the incongruities and contradictions which the satirist handles.

Ramadan Diary was written more than fifteen years ago, at a time when Egypt was still recovering from the aftermath of the defeat in the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. It is to this defeat

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(1) The two plays *Nonsense and Utter Nonsense* were staged in Cairo in the 1970's; *Bonjour* ! and *The Lyrics* (the latter a parody on the title of a classical book of Arabic literature containing verse and prose) *were published* in the 1980's. No book by Ragab has ever been done into English.

that the current religious fundamentalist movement is generally attributed — which is only partly true. The return to faith in weakness is natural enough, no doubt, and the collapse of the secular ideology (alternatively described as Arab Socialism) (1) which Nasser had wanted to substitute for religion accelerated the process, even before Sadat came to power. The Egyptians felt they were in a way betrayed by a leadership that had pointed the way to new heaven, new earth, but had landed them in disaster (2). In loneliness and weakness they naturally turned to God : and it was no coincidence that the apparition of Virgin Mary was believed to appear — and was said to have been actually seen by thousands — at a famous church in Zaytoun, a Cairo district, in 1968. The students' demonstrations in the same year were an expression of the frustration of a whole generation who now felt abandoned, and almost helpless. While attending a concert given by Egyptian musicians and singers at the Royal Albert Hall in London at the time, a Palestinian Christian commented on a song bearing the title «A Hymn to Jerusalem» by saying, «Ah ! now the Egyptians have recognized God !» Throughout the evening we, Egyptians, were taunted with turning to God only in weakness and, «the Pharaohs have at last abandoned their atheism» was a common enough remark.

While the years 1968-1975 saw the birth of religious fundamentalism, this was not only due, I have suggested,

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(1) Cf. my «Introduction» to S. Wahba's *Mosquito Bridge*, Cairo, 1987.

(2) Cf. my Introduction to I. Ismail's *The Trial of an Unknown Man*, Cairo, 1984.

to military defeat or to disillusionment with secular power. Another factor, perhaps no less important, was the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the oil-rich Gulf States : Egyptians were now allowed to leave Egypt (travel had been severely restricted for many years previously), to work in those countries and make fortunes (by Egyptian standards). The argument in the air was : «God must be partial to those people, having given them such a vast wealth because they are true Moslems; while we have opted for a secular ideology !» With the phenomenal rise in oil prices, more and more Egyptians left for other Arab countries and by the mid-1970's the fundamentalists were in a position almost to dictate their views. The period witnessed the return to Islam of many hitherto atheist or agnostic writers — some of the famous «Socialists» and erstwhile secular «philosophers» openly advocated the establishment of an «Islamic Society», that is, a society based on the noble and lofty ideals of Islam rather than on modern «atheist» or, at best, non-religious concepts. Abdul-Rahman Al-Sharqawi was one, Mustafa Mahmoud another. Forces of Enlightenment, led by the British-educated elite, such as Dr. Zaki Naguib Mahmoud and Dr. Louis Awad, were now frowned upon, though they continued to write, almost swimming against the tide.

In such an atmosphere superstitions were rife and it was not uncommon to read articles in the press attacking reason, rationality and modern science as responsible for the «vicious» civilization that separated men from their religion. Self-appointed preachers sprang everywhere; and most bizarre views were expressed on this and that matter, supposedly based on sayins agttributed to the Prophet. Worse still, many people

were willing to suspend the use of «Reason» and accept these false preachers, believing that «blind» credulity implied true piety. Once in Fayyoum (one day in 1975) where I taught some of the poorest students in the country at a newly established Teachers Training College, a boy objected to my use of English exclusively in class, quoting a saying by one of the self-styled preachers who objected to the «new-fangled» ideas about education, to the effect that only Arabic ought to be respected as it was the official language of Paradise ! Sheikh Abdul-Halim Mahmoud, then Rector of Al-Azhar, had produced a book a year earlier about a famous saint buried in Tanta, Lower Egypt. In the «Introduction» he said that he had gone to the tomb of the saint and, though dead for centuries, the latter had spoken to him and given him permission to write the book. Gradually, as is well known, religious «groups» were formed which had explicit opinions on the modern society in Egypt (concluding that it was «infidel» and that it was the Moslems' duty to «emigrate» to other truly Islamic countries) and a confrontation with the State was inevitable. The rest of the story is familiar history. Today, though the fundamentalists are still very much with us, and though the religious-secular debate continues unabated, the religious fervour of the early 1970's has become more individual than social, and is often felt to concentrate on the way women dress (an extremely minor point by Islamic standards) and on Islamic rituals (whether they constitute true worship or not). There are signs which, if read correctly, must corroborate this conclusion : women have not lost any of their hard-won rights ; no amputation of hands or public executions are included in the penal code ; and the arts (painting, sculpture, theatre and the cinema) continue to prosper.

It may be helpful in this connection to compare the present situation in Egypt with that in other Arab countries.

It is against this background that Bahgat's book must be read : he is in more ways than one a force of enlightenment. His religious passion is life-long and, though he has grown a beard like the fundamentalists (after all, it is a sunnah, that is, in imitation of the Prophet's practice) he remains as «reasonable» and rational as he was when he wrote the **Diary.** One of his redeeming qualities is, I believe, his sense of humour. For in the **Diary** we have a protagonist from the people, a common man, realistically portrayed, whose preoccupations are precisely those of the average Egyptian. He is a government employee, worrying about his superiors, his increment and his wife's demands. Like many Egyptians he regards the month of Ramadan as the month of worship, a month during which he can concentrate on «other-worldly» matters, even while carrying on in daily life as usual. He knows what he should do and what he should not but, being human, he sins consciously and enjoys it. The selections translated from the **Diary** present a coherent image of the man, engaging in its simplicity and straightforwardness. The passages printed in bold type are often the comments of the author himself : as he does not propose to write pure fiction, **he allows himself to interfere with the narrative, often to reveal a contradiction or to stress a paradox.**

A light-hearted treatment of a religious subject is almost unprecedented in Arabic ; and it is to Bahgat's credit that **he can make us laugh at the practice of the false mystics who, though they had always existed in Egypt, gained definite respect with the rise of fundamentalism.** The food offered and

the way it is consumed are enough condemnation of those who are supposed to be ascetic and altogether unworldly. However, such pleasures are characteristic of the most devout fundamentalists and are symbolic of the new prosperity introduced by the inordinate oil wealth into our region. Again, it is thanks to his sense of humour that the hypocrisy which mars religious practice everywhere is exposed. On the Night of Power (Laylatul-Qadr) all wishes may be granted by God if based on genuine piety : but what do we have in the way of pious wishes that night ? Nothing but commonplace, mundane desires which are, naturally, turned down by the recording angels.

As literature, the book presents the satiric anecdote as a popular genre ; it is important because of its vast popularity and influence. The English translation by Ms Nermeen A. Hassan is very honest and truthful to the original Arabic text. I have kept her transliteration of certain key words and her footnotes as they help, I believe, to preserve the flavour of the original.

M. Enani

Cairo, 1987

RAMADAN DIARY

1. SIGHTING THE NEW MOON

One of my ancestors who lived during the Mamelukes' era happened to be a man of letters. He set down his thoughts about life in writing, using the old technique of Maqamat (1). This forefather of mine left a few scattered manuscripts, including a yellow paper that relates the sighting of the New Moon, i.e. the beginning of the month of Ramadan in those times.

My forefather wrote :

«On the twenty-ninth of the month of Shaaban, Egyptians in our times prepare themselves to welcome the noblest of all months, the month of Ramadan, during which devils are gaoled, and the number of those suffering injustice at the hands of the Mamelukes diminishes. In the late afternoon, following Salat El Asr (2), the New Moon-sighting procession goes on

(1) A form of Arabic rhythmic prose.
(2) The afternoon prayer.

as usual. All men, women and children take to the streets to watch it. At the head of the procession, heading for the Mokattem hill, is a broken-down old man, who everyone believes, is a great man ! How could it be otherwise, since he is responsible for sighting the New Moon, an honourable function handed down to the elders of his family, from one generation to another.

«The wonder of wonders is that this old man is usually unable to see further than his own feet, because of chronic ophthalmia, aggravated during his childhood by his parents' ignorance ! Despite his confirmed blindness, however, he (of all members of the procession) is capable of sighting the New Moon from a distance ! The rulers, therefore, must perforce take his word for it and unquivocally proclaim the beginning of the month of fasting. But there is reason for this : for the old man uses a young assistant whom he follows and obeys. He would thus spot the New Moon through him. Nevertheless he pretends (Allah forgive him !) and is believed by all, that he has sighted it himself.

«It came to pass, however, (my forefather wrote) that Allah, the All-Hearer and All-Knowing, willed it that the young man should absent himself from the procession on one of those occasions. That was quite a story, without either precedent or analogy to come. For a few days earlier, the young man was walking alone in a lane when he saw a native woman wearing her Milaya (1). She was different from her brown-skinned sisters who were to be found everywhere in the streets.

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(1) A loose garment that native Egyptian Women Wear.

She was as fair as pure silver or a dish of Mehallabiyah (1). Her face under her black Milaya looked like a full moon on a pitch-dark night. As she was exchanging glances with him, and answering his astonished stare with smiles, he felt as if his heart was turning over, and his mind mounting into the air on two wings. In utter disbelief and bewilderment at her response, he nearly fell down headlong. Was he not Egyptian like all other Egyptians, who would be breathless and stand almost in awe before a blonde ? For them, white is the colour of the invading, conquering rulers, and to win a white lady would be akin to a great conquest — the fulfilment of the highest hope thanks to Allah, Lord of all Creation.

«Exchanging glances and smiles, followed by greetings, salutations and words, the youth and the damsel fell in love, part passion, part infatuation. Unluckily for the Egyptians, the twenty-ninth of Shaaban was the date set for the meeting, and as the boy absented himself from the New Moon-Sighting procession that year, the old man was bound to admit his failure to spot the crescent. Fasting was thus inevitably postponed for one day. The Mamelukes said to their subjects : «You gain from the postponement.» while the miserable subjects said : «On the contrary, we are unfortunate.»

«As for the mad young lover, and the girl, and her name starts with an «N», they were entirely detached from what happened and was happening ! for they sat in the temple af latent love, prior to their sitting before the Ma'azoun (2). Life is strange indeed.»

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(1) Egyptian dessert resembling blancmange, made of rice, flour, milk and sugar.
(2) Marriage registrar.

When I finished reading the old manuscript, I smiled ....

In ancient times, as well as in recent years, difference raged among Moslem lawmen over the sighting of the New Moon : Were they to view it with the eye of the old man, or with that of Astronomy ? Should the eye of astronomy be regarded as similar to that of a human being. And was the eye of astronomy as legal as man's ? Around that query, thousands of queries, logical and logicised, were raised, arguments and discussions got heated, and one would have felt as if he was watching an amusing comedy. What rendered the laughter all the more painful was that this should happen between Moslems, whose Religion was first revealed with the word «Read», and whose prophet said that the ink of scholars was like the blood of martyrs on the Day of Judgement Hardly a sura in the holy Quran fails to remind us of Allah's signs in the universe and our souls.

I smoked my cigarette in a pensive, contemplative mood ...

At long last, the month of Ramadan had come. Hail to the best of all months ! Oh, what memories come to mind, while sitting at home, waiting for the fast. I felt as if the whole of Cairo with its one thousand minarets, ornamented domes, old districts and ancient lanes, were all part of me. I loved that month with the same fire I had felt for the first maiden I had known in my life : she was sweet and slim and was all of a tremble when she exerted herself in speech. In the month of Ramadan houses in the city would have some kind of an air of solemnity and tenderness about them. The lanterns of Ramadan illuminated shop corners ; children in the streets played with fireworks ; and people in the alley

where I lived woke up and along with them something within my heart woke up. With every evening and with every advent of the month of Ramadan, something would wake within my heart. Something whose nature or reality I did not know ; somethiing which was as sweet as first love, or as obscure as the days of worries when we did not know if we had fallen in love or were just imagining it.

On the first night of the month of Ramadan, I felt as if all other souls in the universe could be seen through my own soul. Inside me, a strong sense of nostalgia would grow : I wished I could find the ant that spoke to the prophet Solomon, and kiss it ; I wished I could encounter the whale that swallowed Jonah and pat its head; I dreamed of finding the donkey that was resurrected before Ezra, and carrying it on my back. I thought helplessly of the tomb of that hoopoe that had carried the message to the queen of Sheba, and came back to the prophet Solomon to report her worship of the sun. Where was the tomb of that hoopoe ? How splendid would it have been to have the hoopoe brought back to life, so that we could chat for a while about the worship of the sun !

In the early days of the month of Ramadan, I felt love for all beings ; I felt sympathetic for all lovers in all romantic stories, whether they involved humans, animals, plants, for inanimate things. I became fully conscious of the relationship between the moon and the tide. I understood, as well, the secret of that mutual love between the sun and the sunflower which turned its face towards its father, and, when night fell, bowed down its stem and went to sleep.

In the month of Ramadan, I felt as if everything in the

world was founded on love which was the dominant law governing life though people spoil it with feelings of hate and alienation. The feeling of love grew inside me ...

Then I was brought back to reality by the sounds my wife made while exercising her commandship in the kitchen preparing the Sahur (1).

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(1) The meal before daybreak during Ramadan.

II. THE SAHUR CANNON

After two hours the Sahur cannon was fired. All of a sudden, when the time signal struck midnight, my wife became active. The hall lights were turned off, and the kitchen lights were turned on. The four flames of the cooker were lighted, and the food in the cooking pots started to simmer. After a while, the Sahur meal would be ready. The whole household was awake, and in a state of full alert for the meal !

«Ramadan Karim» (1), said my wife, while rushing from the room on her way to the kitchen. Her passing through caused such a displacement of air in the room that I almost fell off my chair. Thank God, the windows were open ! For her, Ramadan was the month of plentiful food, excessive dessert and many invitations for banquets.

I should organise my life in the month of Ramadan.

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(1) Generous.

The great sins committed by man every day have a chance to vanish into thin air in this blessed month, in which we, supposedly, are to experience the sense of deprivation.

— «For Prophet Mohammed's sake, finish this dish of rice, I swear by the Prophet», said my wife.

— «Prayers and peace be upon you, Messenger of Allah», I said inwardly. I stretched forth a hand to the plate of mixed rice.

After that, the family pleadings with me to eat of this kind of meat, to taste that piece of chicken ; or to give in to that pan of kunafa (1), came thick and fast. Each time, the Messenger's name was mentioned, I had to extend my hand unhesitatingly !

While filling up my stomach. I recalled how the wife of Prophet Mohammed, Allah's prayers and peace be upon him, used to live for months without lighting a fire in her house ; how the Prophet's food was made up of dry bread dipped in oil; and how the most beloved and noblest of Allah's creatures knew that kind of noble hunger that thrust man directly into the heart of existence, and made him sympathize with all men.

The Sahur was over with no casualties. I went back to my seat completely helpless, though my communiques claimed the contrary !

After the Sahur meal, I was unable to feel love or affec-

(1) Vermicelli baked in sugar, melted butter and honey.

tion. That fire that occasionally flickered inside me, died down. My only preoccupation was that heaviness which I felt inside my stomach.

As an Egyptian, I asked myself : why when I sit at the dining table, do I eat like one having his last meal ? Is it because of the hunger experienced in the first centuries in the lives of the Egyptians ? Is it because we have become accustomed to the injustice of the ruler whose hand usually sought to reach our food before ours ? Egypt was the greatest country in the world when it came to fertility and generosity. However, its primary tragedy could be that it offered generously with no effort on the part of the recipient. Nevertheless, all its bounties went to others. As the saying goes. So why when we sit at the dining table do we still eat as if this meal was our last ?

I went out to the narrow strip which we call a balcony, looked up to heaven, and saw nothing except stars, and clouds: stars twinkling in the distance, far away in heaven, and a host of clouds that looked like mysterious omens, rushing before the cold winds of November. I felt cold and left the balcony.

I sat up reading for a while, before going to sleep. I fell asleep before having any water to drink !

III. RAMADAN *KARIM*

I woke up at eight o'clock in the morning, feeling very thirsty. Looking at my watch, I realized that I had missed the dawn prayer. Tomorrow I was going to pray the dawn prayer on time !

I took my rosary out of the wardrobe, dusted it off, held it in my hand, and looked closely at myself in the mirror, before going down. I made sure that my appearance was suitable for the month of Ramadan, then went down.

Dust filled the staircase. Amm (1) Abdel Aziz, the doorkeeper stood before the house telling his beads. I told him that there was dust all over the staircase, it would soon accumulate, and bury us. He grinned from ear to ear, played with the beads in his hand and murmured :

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(1) **Literally «uncle»** but gnerally used as **a title of respect** for older **people.**

— «Ramadan Karim.»

— «Allah Akram» (1), I said to him, then left. What a man !

Throughout the year, he sits on his wooden bench before the building (our block of flats). No sooner is he called up by a tenant, than he raises his hands to shout «Allah Akbar» and plunge into devout prayer ! No tenant would dare to disturb him at prayer. Then came the month of Ramadan with his right to pray at all times ultimately and definitely established. Moreover, a new right was added to his other rights : he was not to sweep or wash the staircase !

For some time now, I had been walking in the alley. It had not changed a bit, though new things had appeared here and there. A filthy wooden table with six barrels of pickles on it ; Ramadan lanterns hanging at the haberdasher's ; a banner carrying greetings to the honourable people of the alley on the advent of the blessed month of Ramadan. Under those greetings, there appeared a man's signature. I remembered him : he was a local man perpetually aspiring to represent the district in Parliament; he had stood for the local seat six times in a row and lost, but was not discouraged ! He seized the opportunity of the advent of the lunar month, New Year's eve, or the two Moslem feasts to greet the people of the alley and remind them of his name. Walking in the alley, I saw mounds of dust there. The sweeper seemed to be fasting like the doorkeeper of our house ! I asked myself : Does the sweeper fast all the year ? For years now, my eyes have never been gladdened by the sight of a sweeper ! Had the municipality been

(1) Is more generous.

turned into a home for stoics and fasters who were too concern-ed with the Hereafter, to care about this world with its dusty, bumpy streets ? When they do appear, they seem to care only about the cleanest streets !

I got on the tram. It was crowded as usual. The passen-gers were fasting ; and so was the conductor. No-one smoked.

I did not know what fasting had to do with man's sense of hearing. For the conductor asked a passenger three times about his ticket, the last time shouting in his face. The pas-senger cried : «Are you going to give me another ticket ? I just bought one a minute ago».

— «Right, show it to me», said the conductor.

I was amazed at the lack of confidence people had in each other. I noticed that the conductor did not wet his thumb (by licking it in the usual way) to tear off the ticket.

His mouth was dry on account of fasting. He tore off two tickets instead of one and gave them together to the same pas-senger but when he discovered his mistake, he turned on him. An old woman with a large covered basket, who attempted to get on the tram, was intercepted by the conductor who said to her with a strange arrogance and a sense of self-importance : «Where do you think you are going with that basket ?» He persistently refused to let her get on the tram. The passengers watched this scene, and none of them even thought of helping the old woman. When the tram moved on again, I whispered to the conductor that he had behaved badly to the old woman. He slyly told me that his behaviour with the woman was out of respect for gentlemen like myself, so that her basket would not spoil our clothes !

I did not know how to answer that hypocrite !

I arrived at my government Department.

On the way to my office, I carefully examined the Department's food store : I felt both annoyed and gratified. The thefts which were committed in broad daylight now ceased and would continue to cease for the rest of the month of Ramadan.

There were six desks in my office, that is, five employees with me as their boss, sitting at the head of the room. My boss had another room to himself, and the Head of Department — everybody's boss — had a separate sumptuous office.

A colleague of ours, a young man in his thirties, was not fasting : he never did. Another colleague, a Christian, courteously refused to smoke or drink tea. When he wanted to smoke, he asked for our permission, and we granted it.

The young colleague commented : «Yes Iss-haq Effendi, go ahead and smoke, let the Beys inhale the fumes and ease their fast.» Feeling hurt by his remark, I frowned. How strange were the young men of these days ! The ethics of our generation, now in its forties, no longer existed.

I felt thirsty when tea was brought to those Ramadan offenders in the room. The vast amounts of potatoes and rice I had eaten at the Sahur meal lay heavy on my stomach and so did the beans which called aloud for water to quench their thirst.

I set myself to work on some files and tried hard to concentrate. I was reading each line twice over : from beginning to end, and then back again. My mind was wandering far away

in realms unknown to me. The more I read, the more I frowned, for I realized where my mind was wandering. It was wandering with those damned cigarettes. It was a great love, greater even than that felt by Qais for Laila (1). It was wandering around columns of smoke. How I wanted to smoke ! The fumes of the cigarettes smoked by those Ramadan offenders were filling the room, while cups of nice hot tea formed a beautiful background in the wilderness of our privation !

I felt as if I was going to die of thirst. I said to myself : «If I were to die today, I would be losing the rest of the month of Ramadan, but if I break my fast, I would only be wasting today, and still have the rest of the month to fast in !»

Thinking of Heaven, with its rivers of liquor, milk and honey. I decided to remain steadfast. I frowned and held fast.

I had a friend who was a drunkard. He used to tell me : «Do you know what really saddens me about not going to heaven ? It is the rivers of liquor. You know how the bottle we get every day is finished before we feel tipsy, experience ecstasy, or get plain drunk. So imagine yourself standing before a river of liquor !»

I tried hard to tell him that those rivers of liquor, honey and milk were not full of the liquor, honey and milk we knew on earth. Heaven was a complete mystery unknown to us. It carried names of things we knew on Earth, though they themselves did not resemble anything we knew. The Almighty wanted to present a vision of those things to human minds and

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(1) Arabs' Romeo and Juliet.

to draw the attention of beasts like us to them. He gave them names of things we knew and liked on earth. The Prophet made it clear when he said : «There is in heaven what no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard, and no heart has ever perceived.»

The dreams of my friend, the drunkard, were shattered.

IV. CLERICAL JURISPRUDENCE

I worked today as usual in my office.

I am a civil servant of the third grade, overwhelmed by the feeling that I am just a Pharaonic scarab : the older I grow, the more expensive I become !

My work is confined to signing innumerable papers, after which they are sent on a long journey in the Department for more signatures. They return to me finally, so that I sign them again to show that they are in my possession and that I am familiar with their contents !

How strange work in the civil service is ! One goes to school, studies hard and till late at night, gets high marks to enter university and at the end graduates, goes out into the world and does nothing but sign papers !

I recalled my days in secondary school, when I used to practise my hobby of signing. One common hobby was to

take a pen and a piece of paper and sign, once, twice, thrice ... maybe ten times !

King Mena was responsible for all that, for he was the first pharaoh to unite upper and lower Egypt. The ancient Egyptians discovered papyrus before anyone else. They also came to know the alphabet very early in history, and learned how to write before other peoples. Ever since those times, they have been overjoyed at their discovery, and have insisted on using paper for almost everything. That has come down to us as part of their heritage. And so, signing has become a governmental tradition. As well as an Egyptian hobby.

Everything in the government is accomplished through papers — papers come and go, signatures are added, and yet more signatures to confirm the first signatures !

My day's work at the Department came to an end, after I had opened a great many files ; closed a great many dossiers; told my juniors how inefficient their work was, and told my superiors how perfect their work was !

I left the office with my beads in my hand. Along with an office colleague of mine. I walked down the streets of Cairo to while away the time until the «Iftar».

With the absent-mindedness of a faster, I distractedly glanced at people, and hazily looked about me.

All of a sudden, the scene before my eyes changed completely. A young woman wearing a mini-skirt came out from a side-street. Her short skirt was black, while her tall form was white. The contrast between the two colours sharpened

my senses and I grew, against my own will, excessively alert. My colleague and I had been loitering in a leisurely fashion, but when we saw the woman hurrying along, we unconsciously quickened our pace. I turned my face away from the girl, though, and begged Allah to forgive me. My eyes, however, swivelled in her direction, and again. I found myself begging Allah's forgiveness !

How strange people are ! A thief goes after his victim. after invoking Allah for protection and success !

The Shari'ah (1) gives man the right to have a first look. For the thing coming out from the side street could be a lion that would gobble him up. So you are entitled to a single look to ensure your safety. But as the legal fraternity have it : «If the first look is for you, the second is against you», and the second is defined as that «thorough, contemplative, examining look. That lingers here and there, collects information, arranges hypotheses, makes conclusions and is finally followed by a sly smile lighting up the face.»

Like me, my colleague fixed his eyes, bloodshot with fasting, on the scene before him. I noticed that we were walking with quicker steps and clicking our beads faster. Oh, we must have looked funny !

— «O, Our fasting is fled», he said.

— «Don't worry. It has no legs to flee with !», I answered.

We continued to ogle the girl's fair marble-like form. I noticed that the number of those closely following the mini-skirt

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(1) Islamic Law.

was on the increase. Every passer-by would first look around him, to the right, then to the left, pretend to be looking in the opposite direction, and after making sure he was not observed by anyone he knew, his eyes would swivel in the girl's direction and ogle her.

We were all keeping pace with the girl. We surely looked all right from street- level, but from any roof-top, the view must have been altogether different ! From on high, I imagine angels would contemptuously say that a flock of fasters was hard on the heels of a girl wearing a mini-skirt.

The mini-skirt stopped suddenly, to do some window-shopping. So, there was immediate confusion and disorder in the flock following closely after ! Some broke ranks, while others slowed down.

As my colleague and I maintained our quick pace, we found ourselves ahead of the girl, whose strong perfume was wafted to us on the air. My friend, a bachelor who seemed to have missed his chance to marry, said : «One day, I'm going to marry a girl like that».

— «Girls like that are like Qamareddin (1). You need hard currency for them», said I.

Again we loitered, with distracted eyes, staring at nothing in particular. A few minutes later, I thought I smelt cooking. The smell was like that of delicious vine leaves stuffed with rice. I said to my friend : «Don't you smell anything ?»
— «I smell kebab», he said.

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(1) A kind of jelly, sometimes syrup, made from apricots finely ground, and dried in the sun. Egypt imports it.

— «That's strange !», I said.

— «Why, do you also smell it ?», he asked me.

— «No, it is not the same smell. Tell me, is there a nearby shop that serves food ?»

— «No, there isn't any», he answered.

The street was lined with shops on both sides, but there was no restaurant in sight. There were also no dwellings over those shops ; there were only offices. What did that mean ? I began to doubt my sense of smell. Could our desire to eat create such an illusion and affect even our very real sense of smell ? I really did not know.

We were still walking when I looked at my watch.

My friend said : «Let us stop at the mosque, and take this opportunity to pray».

His words echoed strangely in my sub-conscious, «take **the opportunity to pray». People would commit sins, which they would plan in advance so accurately and so carefully. But when it came to something that had to do with the Creator, they would only take the opportunity to pray Deliberately they sin, incidentally they pray !**

The time was approaching four o'clock in the afternoon, when we entered the Masjid (1) that was almost empty. The Masjid's watchman was sitting next to the shoe-shelves which were likewise empty. My friend and I carried our shoes in

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(1) Mosque.

our hands, because we did not want to give the man the regulation piastre !

The water we used for our ablutions was refreshing and so was the dry air inside the Masjid. There were quite a number of people sleeping by the walls. The air was really good and tempted one to sleep. I started praying :

«Allah Akbar (1)»

«Bism Allah Al Rahman Al Rahim (2)».

I read Al Fatiha (3) ; then a short Sura ; bowed ; stood straight again ; praised Allah ; knelt down ... I was murmuring the words of prayer with other things in mind !

«Subhana Rabbiya Al-'Azim» (4).

The promotion to the «second grade» (with an ample increase in salary and position) which I had been seeking for the past three years, shone clearly in my mind !

«Subhana Rabbiya Al-A'la (5).

I thought of a brainless colleague of mine, who had got it before me, was further promoted, and was now an Under-Secretary !

«Semi'a Allahu Leman Hamad» (6).

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(1) God is great.
(2) In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the Merciful.
(3) The Opening Sura.
(4) Glory be to my Lord, the most Great.
(5) Glory be to my Lord, the most High.
(6) Allah harkens to whoever praises Him.

Hearing the horn of a passing car, I felt pity for myself, for I still had not bought my own car !

«Al-Tahiyat, Al-Mubarakat, wal Salawat Al-Tayibat lellah (1)»

I could not remember where I had left my packet of cigarettes. Was it on the commode, or in the drawer of my desk !?

«Subhana Rabbiya Al-A'la»

I had forgotten to buy a packet of Qmar-eddin for my wife.

When I knelt down, something strange occurred to me : I did not remember if I was doing it for the first or the second time. If it was the first I would have to kneel down again. But if it was already the second, should I have to kneel for a third time ? I thought for a second, and then decided that to be on the safe side, I should have to kneel down again.

I was trying really hard to concentrate. However, a constant stream of problems, thoughts and preoccupations was running through my head !

I finished my prayers, and took out my beads. While I was praising Allah, I remembered where I had left my cigarettes ! I also worked out in my mind what I was to say to my wife when she asked me about her Qmar-eddin !

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(1) I offer up blessed greetings to Allah. To him I also offer up my best prayers.

V. THE IFTAR CANNON

When I opened the door of my house I was assailed by a mixture of different odours of grilled, boiled and roasted food. I licked my fasting lips, and smiled.

In spite of the strong odour of Taqliya (1), my wife abandoned her headquarters, i.e. the kitchen, and rushed to welcome me. I looked at her kind face, and moved my eyes to the Iftar table, but the image of the girl with the mini-skirt flashed in my mind. My wife was not, to be sure, as slim or symmetrical; but the girl in the miniskirt couldn't match her culinary powers !

My wife came to the city to be married to me, and has little knowledge of the «world». She considers me by far the most important civil servant. Actually she considers me the civil service itself ! She believes I am the wisest, the greatest and the most courageous of all people !

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(1) Sauce made of garlic, coriander and melted butter and added to cooked vegetables.

We were waiting for the Iftar cannon to be fired, when I saw the eldest of my children staring at the wall clock, as though wanting to hurry it up !

I carefully scrutinized the dining table. There were some strategic targets, such as the meat and potatoes ; tactical targets, such as the stewed beans and the salad ; and complementary targets, such as the Kunafa and Qatayif (1). There was so much food that there could be no doubt that Ramadan was really Karim !

In cooking, we use only natural butter, for we are very traditional people. My wife once used vegetable oil, but I was so angry that I nearly divorced her !

It was zero hour at long last, with the Iftar cannon roaring in the distance : military operations started !

Lovingly, I watched my children eat. The youngest, who was the closest to my heart, was a bit shy. He would not eat or drink a thing. His mother repeatedly ordered him to eat, but he would not listen to her. However, when I ordered him to eat, he started to.

— «He fears no-one but you, may Allah guard you for us», said his mother to me.

I was greatly pleased by her prayer.

I extended a hand to three dry dates my wife had placed on the table. Those three dates reminded me of the Prophet's

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(1) Small triangular sweets, stuffed with nuts, sultanas and coconut, fried in melted butter and served with honey.

food, Allah's prayers and peace be upon him. I was accustomed to break my fast with dates, in keeping with the Sunna (1). With all the food on the table, the three dates seemed to be out of place. Actually, they were hardly noticeable at all. That was all that was to be seen of Islam on our dining table !

I recalled the best of Allah's creatures : how he had fasted and how he had broken his fast. For the early Moslems, Ramadan was the month during which the Quran was revealed ; a month during which the body was to lighten its burden ; and the soul to resume cotact with its Creator.

I finished eating, and was almost finished myself. I felt so very lazy, and a strong desire to go to sleep overwhelmed me. No sooner had I entered my bedrooom, than my wife came in with a dish of Kunafa and Qatayif !

Of course, it would be foolish and even useless to try to trace Kunafa and Qatayif back to the early days of Islam. Allah's Messenger, prayers and peace be upon him, would have begged for Allah's forgiveness, if he had allowed himself to be full up while even a single Moslem had not eaten his fill or was in the least hungry.

Kunafa and Qatayif entered Moslems' history when love deserted their hearts. Islam has been reduced to an unused rosary, an antique lantern, and words of prayer automatically muttered.

I was tired of eating, so I sat up in bed and started to

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(1) The Prophet's teachings.

smoke. I felt some dizziness resembling that of first love. My children sat next to the radio set. After a while, they would switch on the television. The amount of strange noises made by these two sets were unmatched by anything else in the world !

I tried to fall asleep, but it was useless. The youngest of my children came into the room, holding his religious textbook. He seemed to be in a muddle of some kind. I asked him to come closer to me, kissed him and then enquired what brought him to me.

— «Why do we fast ?», he asked me.

I was surprised by his question. I said : —

«So that the rich may experience the hunger of the poor».

— «O.K., why then, do the poor have to fast ? !»

Again he surprised me by his question. I had given him the traditional reason for fasting we had been taught. But it is not the real reason.

Why do we fast ? Fasting in its true sense is a kind of love. It is the only worship which is not performed by the worshipper in the form of some ritual. That is why true believers do not make an exhibition of their fasting. For fasting is an internal link between the servant and his lord.

VI. AFTERNOON LESSON

Today I asked the Sheikh at the Masjid : «Your eminence, would getting on the bus during Ramadan break one's fasting ?»

Sheikh moved back his Imama,(1) scratched his head and showed signs of deep thought and perplexity before giving me an answer : «You'd better not ! Allah authorized eating pork in case of necessity, and gave a clear license. But when it comes to buses, there is no such clear stipulation. However, the same principle might apply here, that is to say, take the bus if you wish, but it is better not to !»

God bless the Sheikh. I leaned my back against the marble column in the Masjid, and went on looking around me.

Today people sleep and even read newspapers in the

(1) Turban.

Masjid, while in the early days of Islam, the Masjid was a house of learning and a gathering place for Moslems.

The Masjid's servant went round, calling sleepers to wake up : «Wake up Hadji» ; «get up master» ; «rise mister»; Each person had his own call, consistent with his appearance and social standing !

The time for prayer was approaching, and the newspapers in my hands were still untouched. I quickly went through the «religion» pages, No sooner had the Ramadan New Moon been sighted, than the religion pages appeared. Every newspaper wishing to be courteous to its Moslem readers, devoted a whole page to religious matters. It is a religious season ! Once the blessed month came to an end, they would go back to their usual stories about the man who cut his wife's throat or the woman who strangled her uncle and dug her teeth into his flesh !

Those who had taught us «religion» really did us harm. I remember the religion class in my secondary school days. It was the best and nicest of all classes, because coming at the very end of the school day, it was like the 25th hour, unreal ! And as it came immediately after the lunch hour. We felt, naturally, heavy and lazy.

The religion teacher would enter the class-room, write on the blakcboard : «Bism Allah Al Rahman Al Rahim» followed by a couple of words indicating that this was a «class of religion». He would then order us to open our religion textbook and say : «I shall break the neck of whoever dares to raise

his voice. I want each of you to read silently in his book». He would then lean his head on the table and go to sleep.

That is why we regarded the religion class as one for sleeping, playing, laughing, telling stories and getting busy with anything but religion. The teacher himself would enjoy his mid-day rest which was generally uninterrupted. When the noise in the class rose from humming to roaring, he would open his eyes, lift up his head and hurl curses on our heads until we quietened a little, whereupon he would fall asleep again.

At the end of the year, each one of us got ten marks out of ten in religion. It was easy to conclude that though the government had decided to teach religion, it was not taking the matter very seriously.

We grew up and our view of religion somehow developed. Religion became a basic subject at school, in which we were examined and were expected to pass. However, our view remained more or less the same. We had lost touch with religion, resorting to Allah only in times of crisis. I never prayed except before the examinations or whenever I faced a problem. In good and prosperous times I would not mind, but when I had a problem, I would shout «Oh, Lord».

In dealing with Allah, how similar were we to Jewish grocers ! We would give one piastre to a beggar, and say, «Allah, provide me with a palace in heaven, with each of its rooms facing north and overlooking the rivers of milk and honey !»

In a few minutes we should say our prayers and leave. Nevertheless, I ought to wait for Youssef, my friend, who had told

me he would bring me at the mosque a packet of Qamar-eddin. I wondered what had happened to him. Was he going to bring me the packet, or make me look like a liar before my wife and my dependent subjects at home ! ? I sought the assistance of God, and went on counting the crystal pieces of the Masjid's big electrolier. I decided to while away my fasting in that way.

I fell asleep, I could not tell for how long. When does man really sleep soundly ? and what is the secret of those dreams he has in his sleep ? I have no idea. All I know is that I had a very strange dream.

I dreamed that I was in a boat with two oars of sugar, crossing dark-blue water. A few minutes later, the oars melted away in the salt water. The water-level itself began to fall, and the boat went down to the bottom. A fish jumped into the boat. I almost screamed in terror. «You did her wrong», said the fish, pointing with its tail towards the far shore. I saw my wife crying on the other shore, demanding that the packet of Qamar-eddin be brought to her. All the sea fish burst into tears. A big crocodile that emerged suddenly was also crying. «Why didn't you bring her Qamar-eddin ? Why, why ? Isn't she your uncomplaining and devoted wife ?» With these words the crocodile also burst into tears. How had the crocodile come to salt waters ? When the fish wept, the water-level rose again, and my boat accordingly floated to the surface again.

A huge wave of nuts and almonds curled over and struck me hard on my face. Another wave of raisins and dried apricots curled over and hit my head. The sea became full of

terrifying black prunes. I screamed in terror as I felt almost choked. A great hand grabbed me and hurled me into a frightening void. A voice said : «Examine him : of what ingredients is Qatayif made ?»

«Qatayif is made of Qatayif», I answered, all of a tremble.

«Wrong. It is made of dough and rosewater. Why was it called Qatayif ?», the voice asked.

«I don't know.»

«It was called Qatayif, because it is like Qatifa,(1) soft and gorgeous.»

The questioning voice finally said : «Ah, I have got you there. You have lost, you have no hope. Strike him with seventy thousand pans of Kunafa !»

Pans of Kunafa poured down on my head. I felt almost choked.

Suddenly I woke up. I had slept only for a quarter of an hour, so how could I have dreamt all that ? I sought refuge with Allah from the Evil One, and stood up to listen to the afternoon lesson. We formed a ring round the Sheikh. We were very few compared to the crowd that would gather round a girl in a mini-skirt ; or would stand in a cinema box-office queue.

With a sad weary look in his eyes, the Sheikh looked at us. He seemed poor in health, submissive and somehow in

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(1) Velvet.

distress. After thanking and praising Allah, the Sheikh started giving his lesson about **Tayammum (1).** He went on to explain in detail when one is authorized to perform the **Tayammum.** I listened to his words for some time, but then allowed my thoughts to wander. Have the Nile waters dried out, our kind-hearted Sheikh ? Why do you not speak of something relevant to those people ?

That Sheikh reminded me of another old Sheikh in my home village, who, quoting the prophet, Allah's peace and prayers be upon him, used to tell the peasants that 'whoever wore silk in this world, would never wear it in the life hereafter, and likewise, whoever ate off gold plates'. The peasants would simply utter pious noises, asking for Allah's prayers and peace on the Prophet whenever the Prophet's name was mentioned. leave at the end of the lesson, holding close their torn Jalalib (2).

Silk and Gold ? !

That sheikh spoke of silk and gold to people who had not even any winter clothes. And this one spoke of Tayammum to people who neither live nor travel in the desert. They were people who would leave the Masjid's water taps open, simply because they had plenty of water. They were people who would consider it a big loss to fit a washer to a dripping tap at home.

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(1) Performing ablutions without water, that is, when there is no water available to Moslems — as in the desert.

(2) Plural of Jelbab, that is, Galabia.

The two Sheikhs reminded me of a third to whom I used to litsen at Al Azhar Mosque.

Al Azhar is the strongest bastion of Islam, and the oldest Islamic University from which the best scholars have graduated throughout history.

I really held that Sheikh of Al Azhar in great esteem. Sheikh Abd Rabboh offered his services gratuitously and had many followers : he understood the essence and true nature of Islam. He always talked to us about our daily problems. His words went straight to our hearts. He believed that the Masjid was a school for teaching those thousands who had never beer to any. He also believed that the Quran contained the teachings need in daily life by all Moslems. To him, it was important that a Moslem should learn a verse from the Quran, understand its meaning, and act accordingly, before moving on to another verse. He always ended his lesson with a few words about the Prophet, may Allah's prayers and peace be upon him, which I still remember.

«Abu Said Al Khudry, may Allah be content with him, said that the apostle, may Allah's prayers and peace be upon him, would feed his camel or camels, sweep the floor of his home, repair his sandals, patch his garments, milk his ewes, eat with the servant, and help him whenever he got tired of grinding the grain. Nor would he be ashamed to carry his purchases himself from the market-place back home. He would shake hands with the poor as well as with the rich. He would never decline an invitation to a meal, however modest, even to a few dates. He lived modestly, satisfied with what came his way. He was lenient, amicable, affable and

cheerful. He would smile but never laugh, feel sad, but never frown. He was modest without servility, generous without extravagance, kind-hearted and merciful to all Moslems. He never belched from over-eating. And he sought only to acqutre what was good.»

With these words, Sheikh Abd Rabboh would wipe away his tears and say in a whisper : «The Prophet, may Allah's prayers and peace be upon him, died while his shield was left in the possession of a Jew as security for some food he had purchased for his household».

The Sheikh would, then wonder aloud ; «How far have we fallen short of that ideal image of the best of Allah's creatures !»

The Sheikh of the Masjid was still talking about **Tayamum** while a water-tap in the Masjid was dripping away. How I wished that those drops would grow to a flood and wash away the sheikh even as he babbled about **tayammum !**

VII. THE RAMADAN OFFENDER

On my way home from the Masjid, a small incident occurred. A quarrel broke out, when a big tall man, with broad shoulders, rosy cheeks and a bull's neck, lit his cigarette in the tram in front of some fasters. At the beginning he was only met by looks of disapproval and contempt. Then one passenger remarked : «Oh, this is unbearable !». When a rosary snaps, the beads snowball : and these words were like the first in the avalanche of words that followed. The passengers' remarks grew increasingly offensive as well. A man spoke of the need to take other people's feelings into consideration. Another spoke of good manners which were not taught in books. A woman made a contemptuous noise, whereupon all passengers openly joined in attacking the man.

All the while, however, the Ramadan offender sat coolly observing the passengers. I smiled inwardly. I did respect that man for his candidness. I looked closely at those objectors, who were now increasing in number. I said to myself : It is impossible to believe that all those passengers are fasters. I

should say that only about forty percent of them are, and these are surely minding their own business. Fasters always feel superior to those Ramadan offenders and hardly ever mention fasting to them. Those objecting to that man's offence, were definitely the other Ramadan offenders on the tram. It was because one of them had revealed their secret, that they have thus harshly turned against him. I looked at an angry man, from whose lips offensive words simply poured forth, and was convinced he was a Ramadan offender. I could even swear that he had smoked a cigarette just before taking the tram, perhaps in a lavatory or behind closed doors.

The «battle» did not last long and was easily won by the passengers. The Ramadan offender had to put out his cigarette, half-smoked, when the attack on him intensified.

In an attempt to ease the tension which now rose silently even after the war of words had come to an end, I said to the Ramadan offender : «You have been smoking a plain cigarette, which is bad for your health. Why don't you try a filter-tipped one ?»

Half the passengers laughed and sarcastic remarks were made. It seemed to me that they had been waiting for that remark to release their tension ... a remark that actually unmasked their hypocrisy. Strangely, they now turned on me, with one of them telling the Ramadan offender : «Cheer up ! You have found yourself a companion, haven't you ?»

I did not bother to tell that man about my fasting. Actually, I was secretly pleased that the Ramadan offender had lit a cigarette and perfumed the tram with its smoke. I was badly in need of one myself. I enjoyed sniffing the smoke till the

end, for I am a heavy smoker. I would not mind abstaining from food or drink, but to stop smoking really annoyed me. By lunch-time every day since the beginning of Ramadan I would feel half lost. I would hold my fountain-pen in my hand but wonder where it had gone, and start looking for it. I would leave a dossier on my colleague's desk, then look for it on my own for a whole hour. By the afternoon, something inside me would flare up ; I would find that I could see nothing clearly. And as afternoon dragged on, I would feel completely lost. Any problem coming my way, at anytime between noon and afternoon, would seem unsolvable. If I asked the Department's switch operator to dial a number for me, and he was a little late in connecting me, or told me the line was engaged I would then have the same grudge against him that Cain had against his brother Abel when, one night, he turned on Abel, hit him with a dead donkey's jawbone, and left him lifeless. Woe to any member of the public, if he was to come to see me, any time between noon and afternoon, on urgent business! I would dismiss him with an arrogant wave of the hand and tell him to come back the following morning at ten. If he was to tell me that was exactly what I had told him the day before I would accuse him of being stupid and make him understand that he should not press me too hard. In short, my manners deteriorate in the month of Ramadan, and I become too nervous and too impatient with people !

Is there anything wrong with enjoying the fragrance of a cigarette smoked by a Ramadan offender in a tram ? What is the crime in that ? !

I noticed that the passengers had forgotten about the Ramadan offender and turned on me to while away their fast.

Dozens of sarcastic remarks were made about me. I admit, though, that I enjoyed their laughing at me. We, Egyptians, have an unrivalled capacity for humour, and our specific sense of humour is one of the sharpest in the world. Our jokes can be, literally, scathing. I enjoyed the talents revealed in ridiculing me, but thought at the same time of our magnificent hypocrisy. Our propensity to fun is combined with an incredible aptitude for social hypocrisy, equally unrivalled ! I was sure that most of those laughing at me, were not fasters.

That is what we do all the time. Think of one thing and say another; believe in one thing, but never act accordingly, and utter words totally unrelated to our belief. If we sin we swear that Allah is most forgiving, and most merciful. But if others wrong us we stress that Allah shall severely punish them. Thoroughgoing hypocrites, that is what we, or at least most of us, are. We are also skilful at telling lies to ourselves. We commit sins very artistically, but if virtue is mentioned in our talk, we find everyone has become an authority on the subject ! Then one may well wonder - if all people are as virtuous as they claim to be, where do thieves come from ?

My stop came, so I got off the tram, and so did the Ramadan offender. When the tram left the stop, he got out his cigarette packet and said :» Please, do take a cigarette ! Don't get upset because of them. They are only riff-raff !»

«No, thank you, I'm fasting. You are welcome to join me for the Iftar meal», said I.

«Cigarettes are blessing which they arrogantly reject !» he said «It's a firm religious principle that rejection erodes your blessings !»

He walked away without a care in the world, but with clouds of smoke ascending ! I stood and watched the bulky figure whose heavy tread seemed to shake the very asphalt of the street vanish in the distance.

VIII. THE FALSE MYSTIC

I was coming out from the Masjid when I bumped into him. At first I did not recognize him, because of his beard and the Sheikhs' costume he was wearing, as I had been used to seeing him dressed like all **effendis** in the European style ! He was an old classmate, and a colleague in the civil service, not in my Department, though. Yet, life had separated us, and each went his way.

Recognizing me, he gave me big hugs and kisses. «Where are you old man ? It has been so long since we last met. How are you, and how are your children ?»

I could easily understand from his eager welcome that he wanted to tell me something, which he wished to share with me in his excessive happiness. He had intended to enter the Masjid, but when he saw me coming out, he, to my surprise, insisted on accompanying me for a while. What surprised me more, was the fact that he was being followed by some people : one

of them carrying a cane, another a suit-case, and a third a rosary. They were closely following him at a steady pace.

«Are you being chased ?» I whispered in my friend's ear. He laughed and whispered, «Oh, no ! these are my followers ! I have become the Sheikh of a Tariqa (1). «How strange !» I exclaimed.

He straightened up his huge frame. Touching his beard with an august gesture, he said : «Nothing is strange. My father was the Sheikh of a Tariqa in the country-side and, on his death I took over. My followers are numbered in thousands. It is better than inheriting an estate, or having a permanent job !»

«You were in the civil service, have you quitted your job ?»

He interrupted me and said in a low voice : «I chucked it up ! I no longer needed that job with all the troubles it caused me ! You should come to visit me. There is a small ceremony which we hold in my home village every night. Any day you call, you will be treated as the guest of honour. You will, then, eat **Fattah** (2) and **Qatayif** ; attend a nice **Zikr** (3) circle. You will see thousands kissing my hand. Imagine people fighting each others to be blessed by this hand of mine, which has never done any good ! If you come, you too will have to kiss my hand.»

I said to myself : «One day, I shall go to see him !» and that is exactly what I did.

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(1) Head of a Moslem mystic order.

(2) Bread crumbs soaked in soup, topped with rice and meat.

(3) Repetition of certain words or formulas in praise of God, usually to the accompaniment of music and a whirling dance in a circle.

On my way there, I thought how different old and contemporary mystics were. In the old days, mysticism meant having a burning in the heart ; whereas today it is reduced to wearing rags. In the old days, it was a name given to a state of mind reached by ascetics, but today it refers to a status claimed by a false ascetic.

When Abu Omar El Zujaji, the mystic, whispered «Allahu Akbar» in prayer, his face turned pale. When he was asked the reason, he answered that he feared to start praying without being truthful. For to utter «Allahu Akbar», but have something else in mind, was to be a liar.

Oh, God rest your soul, Zujaji, for you have not lived to see the day when the sheikh exclaims «Allahu Akbar», while his mind wanders to the waiting Fattah and Qatayif. He prays hastily, then rushes quickly to the food to eat at leisure.

The car reached the place where the ceremony was being held. It was a big country house, hosting more than one thousand people. Men led me from one room to another, taking me to their head, the Sheikh of the **Tariqa,** my old classmate and former colleague in the civil service !

When he saw me enter the room, the Sheikh stood up, and so did the other men in the room, as a sign of respect to the Sheikh. He held out his hand to me, which I shook. However, the hypocrisy in the room must have been contagious, for I found myself bending over his hand to kiss it. I had a great urge to laugh but I resisted and managed to look serious enough. He made me sit by his side, then whispered laughly in my ear : « Since I have no son or daughter, I shall recom-

mend you to be my successor in heading the order after my death.»

The ceremony started when a singer stood up with a metal stick in one hand, a metal rosary in the other. Beating the stick with the rosary producing a very nice tune, he then began to utter words in praise of the Prophet : «Because of my great love of the Prophet, I quitted my work. Oh, oh, because of my great love of the Chosen, the Beloved, I quitted my work».

The singer went into a long soliloquy, speaking of his love of the Prophet, and his sacrifices for the sake of that love. He said he had given up his work, his children, and the whole world, and now had nothing in his mind, except that love.

Listening to the singer, I was surprised by the sweetness of his voice, and the poor meaning of the words he sang.

Could that pretentious singer love the Prophet, Allah's prayers and peace be upon him, more than Abu Bakr El Siddiq or Omar Ibn El Khattab (1), who had not quitted their work for his sake, and up to the last moment of their lives had worked to earn their living ?

A few minutes later, the singer changed the rhythm, producing a faster tempo. All those sitting in the room, except for my friend, the Sheikh of the **Tariqa**, and myself, stood up **and jerked to the right, saying «Allah», then to the left, again** sayin «Allah». The singer, who was keeping time for them

(1) The Prophet's companions, and Moslems' first two Caliphs respectively.

increased the tempo, and so did they. One could only hear the syllable «lah» uttered by them in their quick singing and dancing.

A follower burnt some more Indian incense in the censer, filling the room with its sweet scent. As the dancers quickened their movement, sweat dripped from their foreheads. I looked closely at the scene before me, like one watching a comedy. Is this how should God be praised, the most Powerful, the most Exalted ! ?

One day, Al-Shebly, a notable mystic, was received in audience by Imam Juneid. As the former was in a state of agitation, as often happens to mystics, the latter asked : «If you are in the presence of Allah it is bad manners to shake like that or to be excited at all. But if you are not, what is it, then, that makes you so excited ?»

Al-Shebly cried out : «Oh Imam, it is repentance».

The **Zikr** continued : the chanting rose and fell, while the man with the metal stick slowed down the tempo whenever he felt that the dancing men were tired.

Feeling very hungry, I said to my schoolmate : «I'm hungry».

«Be patient. The most important item in our ceremony is not here yet. The **Fattah** is not ready yet !», said my friend, the Sheikh of the **Tariqa.** He, then, shouted in a long drawn-out voice : «Wahidduuuuh !» (1).

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(1) Declare God to be One.

The singers and the dancers stopped singing and dancing and said : «There is no God but God.» My friend, the Sheikh of the **Tariqa** said : «Whoever proclaims it must go to Paradise».

His words were apparently the signal the cooks had awaited. No sooner had he finished, than the door was opened and four men carrying a shining copper basin full of steaming hot **Fattah** and large chunks of meat, entered. The smell of **Fattah** mingled with that of the incense, though the former smell predominated.

I cannot recall the name of the philosopher or the thinker who described us, Egyptians, as emotional people. I realized that fact when the **Fattah** was placed in the middle of the room : the eyes gazing at it, had a hungry longing that eclipsed Qais' yearning for his Lafla !

The Sheikh of the **Tariqa** first extended his hand to the **Fattah,** and then, other hands followed. The assault had begun ! I then discovered that there was a great similarity between those people's way of eating and their performance in the **Zikr.** For the sound of their spoons in the basin was like the quick tempo which had ended their **Zikr**. And the tempo of their eating also slowed down, much in the same way the tempo of their dancing had done earlier. They were also sweating here, as they were in the **Zikr** circle. The men finally leaned back, rubbing their hands in their beards and said : «O Lord ! feed us from the bounteous Heaven.»

«The dessert, boy», said my friend, after everyone had finished with the **Fattah.** «Tonight, we are going to show you

kinds of dessert which you have never seen even in your dreams», he said, addressing me this time.

I recalled the Arab saying : «Without the sweet, no meal is complete !»

Three pans full of Qatayif, doused in butter and honey, were brought into the room.

As if he were going to the Jihad (Holy War) my friend the Sheikh said : «In the name of Allah, we place our confidence in Him.» He then roared like a hungry lion, and extended hand to a piece of Qatayif crammed with pistachios, almonds and walnuts. Honey was dripping from the Qatayif onto his beard. Eating the sweet in one bite, he whispered to me : «I grow a beard that serves as a screen to stop honey from dripping on my Jibba (1), and staining it. Why do you not eat ?»

I was full up and feeling so exhausted at the end of that «Fattah» battle, that I could not say a word ! I felt as if I was going to die. Food weighed heavily on my heart, and I breathed with difficulty.

My friend's first miracle that night had to do with me. He said : «You are not going to die, man ! Don't ever speak of dying, when you have all these Qatayif in front of you».

And so , I extended a hand to the Qatayif. They were really sweet, so I could not resist them any longer and went on eating.

This reminded me of the words of a mawwal (2) about

(1) A long outer garment, open in front with wide sleeves worn by Sheikhs.

(2) A poem in colloquial Egyptian Arabic often sung to the accompaniment of a reed pipe. It is more like a ballad.

Egypt, sung by the common people. It said, in part : «He who built Egypt was originally a confectioner !» If we did not love sweets so much, we would never have thought that Egypt was built by a confectioner, not by King Mena.

The ceremony was over, and so I left. A strange sad feeling crept over me on my way back. One of my friend's followers gave me a lift home, driving me in my friend's private car.

All the way back, the follower went on telling me about the miracles worked by the Sheikh whom I knew very well ! He told me that one day the Sheikh, going to visit a sick man, came to a stream, and wallked on its surface ! Another day, he wanted to travel to Banha to meet a holy man there. When he found that he was late for the meeting, he flew up into the air ! I looked at the follower in astonishment. Did he think I was a potential customer ? Did I look to him like an idiot ? I was nodding my head to him, though in actual fact, I was busy watching the moon from the car window.

The moon looked pale and wan, veiled in dust. I felt the moon belonged to me more than to those who had just landed on it. I got the feeling of being in love with the moon, which has gone away to marry someone else.

Oh moon ! My companion ! Foreigners have just returned, from a trip to you, while we Moslems still dispute about the rise of the crescent ! Moslems were never like that when Islam was first revealed. Islamic culture gave the world great scientists and scholars. I recalled the eminent names that had shone in all fields --- Jaber Ibn Hayan in chemistry; Ibn Haytham in physics ; Abu Bakr El-Razi in medicine; Ibn Sina in

philosophy and surgery ; El-Ghazaly in religion, Ibn Rushd in rational philosophy and Ibn Khaldoun in sociology and history. I said to myself : «our culture gave those scholars to the world, when Moslem rulers ate dry bread dipped in oil and worried about the poor who could not afford to buy meat. Our cutlure gave the world the basis of scientific methodology, founded on observation and experimentation. Moslems came to know methodology when they were serious minded, that is before they got busy experimenting with Qatayif, observing Kunafa, gulping down Qamar-Eddin, and attacking true Moslems».

My friend's follower was still talking about the Sheikh's miracles and wonders. I suddenly turned to him and said : «What do you think, holy man, of those who went to the moon ?» «No-one went to the moon», said the Sheikh's folllower.

«But they have sent photos from up there ?»

«They are lying, my Bey. Don't believe them», the man insisted.

I thought : «It is because of people like you, dear Juggler, that people have departed from the true spirit of Islam. It is because of people like you that we have been defeated by those who were the first to go to the moon. In the old days, Islam accepted from Moslems nothing less than perfection in everything, whether in science or religion. Today, lunatics spread the claim that whoever says «wahiduuh», even after a life full of sins, will go to heaven ! Allah's Messenger, prayers and peace be upon him, was quoted as saying : «A believer who is strong is better and closer to Allah, than a weak believer». The term «strong» meant to be strong in every possible respect : in

science, philosophy, history, literature, and the art of warfare. It was an all-out call to be strong, for without strength Islam should collapse from within.

That happened in the old days of Islam, while today lunatics pray : «Oh Lord, Keep foreigners busy with science, so that we can devote ourselves to your worship». That could be the severest harm done to religion. God bless those prime days of Islam, God bless those days which were the greatest in the history of Mankind.

I slept for the rest of the trip home. It was a sleep induced by sorrow, as only God knew !

IX. AN ENCOUNTER WITH IBLIS (1)

A sudden fleeting green light made me realize that there was someone else with me in the room. I did not raise my eyes from the ancient book I was reading .. a book on magic whose pages had grown yellow with age. I was reading about the devil, when I sensed his presence in my room. He was sitting there on the sofa opposite to me, though the door of my room had been closed all the time. How could he have entered then ? I could not tell.

I saw a man whose age I could not guess. His clothes showed that, though he had belonged to a good family, he must have fallen on hard times.

— «Are you He ?», I asked fearfully.

— «Iblis», he answered politely.

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(1) Satan.

— «If I read a verse from the Quran, will you then go away ?», I asked.

— «If you read it with sincerity, of course I shall have to leave at once», said Iblis.

— «Will the verse burn you up ?»

— «For the verse to burn me up, you first have to act accordingly.»

— «I shan't read it, because I would like to chat with you. Tell me, how did you enter my room ? I mean, how did you come here ? I mean, are you really there, sitting on the sofa, or are you just a figment of my imagination ?»

— «Don't complicate things. A real civil servant, that's what you are ! A civil servant would think like that. Your mind is part of the substance, and so is this sofa. There is no difference whatsoever between your mind, and that broken brick in the pavement opposite your house»

— «In my language, it is a joke to say that somebody's mind is as hard as a stone. Are you having a joke at my expense ?»

— «I never make jokes. I haven't laughed since the day I was expelled from Heaven.»

— «I am, actually, surprised by your unexpected visit, for it is said that during the month of Ramadan you are imprisoned.»

— «The whole thing cannot be defined in that absolute hu-

man way of thinking. To me, Ramadan is the month of my summer vacation, as August is for you. Of course, during Ramadan there is less work for me to do. But as you may know, not all people are Believers. So, we never stop working. On the contrary, our problems and burdens have increased.»

— «It is so nice seeing you. I had been dreaming for so long to see you, and have a talk with you.»

— «Just like you, I do feel bored, and would like to chat. I saw you writing the memoirs of a non-faster, under the title of «Diary of a Fasting Moslem (1) : so I thought of paying you a visit.»

— «So we have the mutual wish to chat. Now, there are thousands of mysteries in your life. which I would so much like to ask you about.»

— «There is nothing mysterious in my life. Mystery is a characteristic of man».

— «You do believe, then, that you are keeping nothing back ?»

— «Absolutely none. From the very beginning, I stated my objection. I declared it before God. Could any of you mortals, dare to object before any of your worthless rulers on earth ? What is it you consider a mystery about me ?»

— «We do very much appreciate your openness, but then, you do assume thousands of disguises and never show yourself to people so openly.»

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(1) The original title of this book.

— «That is the secret of my profession. The technology of diabolical temptations. Science has advanced, and you cannot expect me to stand still, and let the good get ahead of me. What else do you want me to explain ?»

— «Your very existence : are you actually present before me now, or are you just a thought in my head ?»

— «Which is more important : to have material existence but be totally unknown to you ; or to exist only in your mind, and have no presence outside it ?»

— «You do ask strange questions ! Are you a body, or a thought ?»

— «Oh, you argue just like the sons of my old enemy. There are thousands of bodies that are thoughtless. Do you think those have any value ? There are thoughts, however, which may not be embodied except in a thousand years or so.

— «This is sophistry ! Why have no sons of Adam seen you ?»

— «Can any of them see the sound waves travelling in space ? Can you see the waves which a wireless set receives ? Why don't you, then, deny their existence ?»

— «I have often thought of your childhood. Did you have one, just like all other creatures ? Sorry, I mean just like all other thoughts ?»

— «Every creature has its own childhood».

— «Were you a naughty boy ?»

— «On the contrary, I was the quietest at the-educational primary school for jinns. Oh, those were great days ; and I learned how to be proud at a very tender age. One day, I refused to answer the arithmetic examination paper. I handed in a blank answer paper. The examiner asked me: «Do you know how to do the sums !», I said : «I do». «Why haven't you, then, done them ?» I said «Because I'm better than the examiner. These are silly questions that prove nothing».

— «You got a big zero in the exam, didn't you ?»

— «I never bothered about the results. What I cared for most at the time was to say what I thought of the examiner».

— «I forgot to ask you the most important question of all : Why did you refuse to kneel to Adam ?»

The devil's face showed anguish and terrible pain, when I mentioned Adam's name. The sudden paleness of his face encouraged me to go on. I said :

— «You made us lose Heaven and get stuck here on earth ! You also ruined your future ! Now, let me tell you informally : «God damn you Iblis, for you were behind our banishment from Heaven !»

— «You are just as abusive as all Adam's sons. Listen. I am not your friend : you can be one of my disciples only when you follow me. Therefore, I regret to tell you that I shall not allow you to speak to me informally ; or to insult me, and if you will not apologize to me at once, I shall leave you immediately !»

— «Mr. Lucifer, former peacock of the jinns, I am sorry, sir. I didn't know that you were so frightfully proud, and have no sense of humour. I was only joking with you, Iblis».

— «Please, make sure you do not forget to add «Mr.» before mentioning my name ! I was a real master, long before your first father was created !»

— «Do you really believe that you are better than him, I mean, better than Master Adam ?»

— «He is only **your** Master.»

— «You haven't answered my question ?»

— «The question about who is better, Adam or I, had been settled by your Creator. To me, however, it is a complicated matter. Before Adam was created, I had been a great **concept.** After he had been created, and I had been commanded to kneel down before him, I became a different concept : an idea dependent on Adam ; an opposing idea».

— «Oh, you ruined your future, and because of you, we have been banished from Heaven !»

— «Because of you, I was banished from God's grace !»

— «Why didn't you kneel down, for your own and our sake ?»

— «I was testing my freedom.»

— «Allah could have turned you into dust, before you refused to kneel down before Adam.»

— «If God had killed me before I refused to kneel down

before Adam, I would have known that He loved me. I know, however, that He does not. God gives freedom to all His creatures ; those whom He loves ; and those whom He does not. God is not like those rulers on earth, who would gaol those who disobey their orders. God is greater.»

— «These are the words of a believer, Mr. Iblis. Are you such a hypocrite ? For you are a devil, and yet speak like a believer.»

— «I am no hypocrite. If I had been, I would have knelt down before Adam. I believe in God, but I do not believe in Adam. Anyone in my position must believe in God, because he must realize His greatness. The paradox is that, when I disobeyed God I, though a believer, have been regarded as an unbeliever ! The meaning of belief differs from one race to another. We, the jinns, believe in the Creator, because we know his abilities only too well. For you mortals, faith means believing in the unknown, and the unbeliever a creature who either denies the existence of his creator or who does not worship him alone. For us, unbelievers are those among us who disobey God's command. For you, acts of disobedience may be repented, and so forgiven. For us, disobedience is a final dismissal from God's grace, and no repentance could help».

— «Because of you, we were banished from Heaven.»

— «Such a bureaucratic way of thinking ! Did you want to inherit Heaven ? Do you take Heaven to be a convenience

for lazy civil servants and lunatics ? I would so much like to laugh now, yet I simply cannot».

— «Why can't you ?»

— «I don't know how to. My face would not help me. My features have hardened to a terrible grimness and I feel as though I am about to cry, but the tears never come.»

— «Excuse me for asking you this question. It is quite a sensitive one and, well, here it is. Why do you always associate yourself with that silly business — I mean that business between men and women ? You do understand what I mean, don't you ? »

— «I am sure now you are very intelligent Believe me, this is not my job. I'm a superior devil, belonging to class 2, no less. That business you are talking about, is assigned to clerical demons of the eleventh grade.»

— «How strange ! Do you have grades and red tape like us ?»

— «Just like you. Inflation is running high, and I haven't had my increment for the past three hundred years. It's just unfair to me !»

— «Why do your eyes have such a sad arrogant look ?»

— «Because I have no hope of God's mercy.»

— «Oh, I haven't offered you a thing would you care for something ? Tea, coffee, ginger, cinnamon ?»

— «Traditional beverages.»

— «I'm afraid we don't have any Qamar-eddin. You know how difficult it is to get it these days.»

— «It is I who named it Qamar-eddin.»

— «Oh, you have given me a hard time trying to guess why it was so called. By the way, why did you call it Qamar-eddin ? Why do people drink it only in Ramadan ?»

— «It is just a trade name. As for why people drink it only in Ramadan, you had better ask them.»

After lighting a cigarette, I sat watching Iblis. He settled down more comfortably and made himself at home, crossing his legs, folding his hands on his chest, scrutinizing me with a sad look. It was a strange kind of sadness that was not to be understood by mortals.

How strange is that creature ! What I like about man is that he deals both with good and evil ; virtue and sin. What is nice about man is his broad-mindedness. As for Iblis and his offspring, they are inflexible, reactionaries, deal only with evil, and have but one single viewpoint. A humanbeing, no matter how vicious, could still say : «One day I cried in fear of Allah». As for that Iblis, he could remember no single good deed of his.

Concealing my feelings, I said to Iblis :

— «People speak of evil as being widespread these days. would you tell me please : is evil on the increase, or on the decrease ?»

— «Evil is governed by the law of supply and demand. Some-

times it increases, sometimes, it decreases. In every age, the reformers claim that evil is increasing, while the depraved claim it is decreasing. Both are wrong in their claims.»

— «You do your best to make evil prosper, don't you ? That is your job after all !»

— «We market our evil merchandise : blasphemy, polytheism, hypocrisy, lies, theft, bribery, idecent fashions, gettingg on buses, and so on and so forth. We do our best to promote these goods, but we never force anybody to buy them. We have no power (or authority) to make people accept them. We only tempt people and those of your kind cannot resist temptation. Creating favourable conditions for evil is what we are here for.»

— «Since we are talking about 'creating favourable conditions', let me go back to that business between man and woman. What are, in your opinion the 'favourable conditions' for that business to prosper ?»

— «You are mentally deranged ! Your mind is focused on mental (and emotional) derangement ! As I have already told you : this is the job of the lowest demons ... an altogether insignificant issue !»

— «For you, it might be insignificant, but to me it is significant. Do you mind talking about it ?»

— «Not at all.»

— «Whom do you think is to be blamed for it, men or women ? I mean, do you think —»

— «You know, sometimes I do wonder at men's hypocrisy, especially their ability to lay the blame for their sins either on us or on women ! A man would tell his son : «Come on boy, court a girl, don't be a clod !» The same man, however, would tell his daughter : «I'll slaughter you if I catch you talking to someone, or looking out of the window !» A man may commit any number of sins, but society only says that he is a big flirt, and that he is only having a fling ! But if a woman makes a single mistake society must stigmatize her as a slut ! A man may marry, and still enjoys his «freedom» ; but he must require his wife to be absolutely faithful to him. Men in backward societies still consider their faults as lawful, and those of women as unlawful.»

— «You defend women as if you were a woman yourself !»

— «You get me wrong ! I defend nobody ! Both men and women are my enemies. As a matter of fact, getting older helps even a devil to discover new things .. such as hypocrisy in men, which confuses me !»

— «You don't seem to be happy with your job. Don't you find any pleasure in your work ?»

— «Work is work everywhere ! It spells trouble and entails responsibilities. My personal tragedy is that : though I refused to kneel down before man, I found myself following him and having nothing but him on my mind. Oh, what misery !»

— «Why don't you try to forget about Adam ?»

— «Forget ! Are you mad ? ! The passage of time roots the incident all the more firmly in my mind and increases the pain in my heart. I'm a creature that has lost all hope of winning God's grace, and this unleashes my talents for revenge !»

— «Why don't you think of something else, instead of revenge ? Why don't you find yourself a hobby that keeps you busy, and leave us alone ?»

— «A hobby ? ! Find myself a hobby ? ! My hobby is **politics !** Kennedy's assassination was a political manoeuvre in which I had a hand. With the help of my men in the C.I.A., the F.B.I., the Police, and the world of big business I assassinated Kennedy !»

— «This is not what I had in mind. What I meant was that you should find yourself a hobby away from us.»

— «Man is both my job and my hobby !»

— «Haven't you ever thought, Mr. Iblis, that your refusal to kneel down before Adam was predestined ?»

— «Oh, you mean the other side of the tragedy .. the curse ?»

— «I don't understand you.»

— «That is what I have been thinking of all the time. God knew that I would refuse to kneel ; that I would turn to pure evil. If I had known that God knew what was to happen, I might have behaved differently. The tragedy is that God knows what goes on inside me, while I have no idea of what God is thinking !»

— «Were you dreaming of cheating the Creator ?»

— «I thought I had already cheated Him by worshipping Him for thousands and thousands of years, until he made me equal to the angels. But I laboured under a delusion. For God knew there was a trace of hypocrisy in my worship. He also knew that I was worshipping Him not for His own sake, but because I wanted to be promoted ; and because of the pride and glory one acquires from worshipping Him. That truth I never told anyone, not even my wife or my most intimate friend, how then did God come to know about it ? !»

— «Rumour has it that you won Eve's affection and made her persuade Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit.»

— «I know Eve ! I persuaded Adam himself. I made him ask himself certain questions which I transmitted into his consciousness through «vibration» : «Why did God forbid you to eat fruit ? To whom would you be doing an injustice if you were to eat it ? Will you be doing such an injustice to yourself or to the fruit ?»

— «What happened then ?»

— «Well, with his mortal mind, Adam went on thinking hard and wondering. When he seemed to me ripe enough, I said : «God forbade you to eat from that tree, so that you wouldn't become an eternal king !»

— «And did Adam believe you ?»

— «Adam's weakest point is being Adam : his body is made of clay, and his soul is a breath from God, and the conflict

between clay and sublimity has never ceased. It is not inevitable that sublimity should always defeat clay. Oh, how great are those battles fought and won by clay against the greatest values in the universe ! This is my job. »

— «Did Adam really believe that Allah forbade him to eat the fruit so that he would not be an eternal king ?»

— «Yes he did. Adam is a human being, and his first problem is that he is destined to die, though eternity is desirable. Adam was made of clay, and his problem was that he wanted to change himself into light, of which angels were made. This is also desired by man.»

— «So ?»

— «Well, he believed me immediately and without hesitation. Maybe he hesitated for a while, feeling frightened ; maybe he had a conflict within him, but in the end, he ate the forbidden fruit. Adam was created to worship and disobey, while I was created only to disobey. Even my previous worship was added to my sins, on account of its having been proud and hypocritical. Oh, damn it !»

— «Why are you cursing now ?»

— «It is a habit I have acquired, since I was expelled from heaven. I was, then, seen off with a curse, and have subsequently sent down my curses on all and sundry.»

— «You are portrayed as having horns, hooves, and a small ugly face. Why is that ?»

— «This is a portrait of man himself. Do you see any horns or hooves on me ?»

— «None at all. Would you consider me inquisitive if I asked you about your 'dreams' ?»

— «My dreams ? To me, this word is meaningless.»

— «I mean your 'hopes' ?»

— «I have no hopes.»

— «Hell is the only place where there is no hope.»

— «I have been in Hell for thousands of years. This is the difference between us, devils, and you, human beings. Any one of you could commit sins but cry and repent during these days of the month and, God may then accept your repentance. Our work is thus easily wasted ! What we build up in a whole year, you pull down in the last ten days of Ramadan !»

— «Haven't you ever cried ?»

— «I would give half my kingdom, in return for one single tear. For crying is repentance, and the door to repentance was closed to us for all time. It was closed by my grandfather Iblis, God damn him.»

— «You curse your grandfather just like that ? !»

— «According to our custom, when we speak of the dead, we say : God damn him», as according to yours you say : «God rest his soul »

— «What do you think of those who went up to the moon ?»

— «They belong to a friendly civilization, based on faith in material things just like us. I don't understand, however, the secret of that big fuss made about going up to the moon. The youngest of my children, goes there every day to play hide-and-seek.»

— «What is your most important task, that is, the task through which you feel that you really fulfil yourself ?»

— «My main job is to give people a wrong impression of God .. to drive them to despair of ever winning God's mercy. As for the most enjoyable job in which I do fulfil myself, it is to influence the teaching of religion in your schools in such a way as to make it repugnant to them. Do you know that the style of teaching religion in your schools spares us much work ? !»

«Well, well ! wasn't it because of you, that we were banished from Heaven ?»

— «Oh, No ! It was because of you that Iblis was denied God's mercy and grace ! What is Heaven, compared to mercy and grace ?»

— «I have disturbed you with so many questions. I can see you sitting ill at ease, wishing to go. Oh, but I haven't offered you anything to drink ! Well, perhaps a burning cigarette will be more welcome to an inmate of hell !»

— 'A joke in bad taste', he blurted out and disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared.

X. MY COPTIC GREAT-GREAT-GRANDFATHER

I have a Moslem name, and so has my father. My grandfather was a Sheikh at Al-Azhar, and his grandfather was also a Moslem. I can trace my Moslem ancestry back as far as the twentieth Great-Great-Grandfather. My family, moreover, possesses a document that proves its direct descent from one of the famous Arab leaders who took part in the conquest of Egypt. But as I am always sceptical about documents, I considered another possibility. My Great-Great-Grandfather could have been a Copt, who lived in Egypt more than a thousand years ago ! «When Islam conquered Egypt, he probably did not think at first of embracing the new religion», I thought to myselt as I began to reconstruct a possible past.

My Great-Great-Grandfather was an armourer by trade. The poor man had always been persecuted by the Romans who would buy his swords and shields and pay him only half their real value.

My Grandfather could not have felt very hopeful when one day a Moslem Arab came to him to buy a sword. He said to himself : «Conquerors are all the same ... always and everywhere.» My Grandfather, though, resorted to his natural 'cunning' .. often associated with the Egyptian mind .. and delayed the delivery of the weapon for as long as he could. However, when delivery-day came he was surprised to find the Moslem paying him in full, and even before receiving the sword. The Moslem even tipped him generously. In the evening, my Grandfather told my Grandmother : «Those Moslems are completely different from the Romans. I much prefer dealing with them.»

My Grandfather carefully scrutinized the Moslem soldiers who came to his shop. He found that they washed five times a day : ate dry bread dipped in oil : lowered their eyes if an Egyptian woman passed by them ; paid in advance for anything they bought ; did not fell a single tree ; did not trample down a single plant ; did not drink alcohol ; and it was hard to tell any difference between them and Egypt's good-hearted, civilized and peace-loving people. He also compared the injustice done to him throughout his life by the Romans, with the new justice administered by the Moslems who did not discriminate between the rich and the poor.

One day, my Great-Great-Grandfather asked a Moslem soldier :

— «Who is your commander ?»

— «My commander is a book», answered the soldier.

— «What does that book command you to do ?»

«It commands me to be truthful and kind to people, and invites them to worship the One Merciful Creator».

— «If I refuse to become a Moslem, what would you do to me ?»

— «Nothing. There is no compulsion in religion», the Moslem soldier answered.

— «That is great, because I really hate to be compelled by anyone to do anything at all.»

My grandfather, then, finally decided to embrace Islam. He chose for himself that very long name of «Abdullah Ibn Sayf Ibn Dir'a Ibn Assad El Mahdi». He wanted it long enough to fit into the long placard he fixed on the front of his shop.

Days went by, and Allah made Abdullah prosper. He then took to himself a second wife. His first wife spread the word that he adopted Islam to be exempted from the Jizya (1), being tight-fisted ; and also in order to marry more than one woman, being fond of women. Days went by, and Hadjj Abdullah Ibn Sayf Ibn Dir'a Ibn Assad El Mahdi passed away, leaving behind him his son Adham Ibn Abdullah. A succession of Moslem names followed.

Now one of his descendants came to know of a man who was good at forging genealogical documents which traced a man's ancestors to a great Arab leader and was immediately interested. He asked the man to write him a nice long docu-

(1) Head tax on free non-Moslems under Moslem rule

ment in which we would be the lineal descendants of that gallant leader.

The trick worked with Al-Jabarti, the great historian, who included the document in his book on the history of Egypt. When the book was published, the document won universal credence.

Seven days after I had been born, my father went to the public records office to write my birth certificate. In the blank space allotted to the child's name he wrote a Moslem name. Being a week-old baby at the time, I was in no position to know about it. At the age of three, I found people calling me by a particular name. I learned that name by heart, as it seemed to refer to me. Till then, though, I could claim no credit for being a Moslem.

At the age of seven, the religion teacher at school told us that Allah would torture people by throwing them into fire. The teacher described to us, who were only children, how Allah would scorch those people's skin, and as it peeled off, He would replace it with fresh skin, and so on and so forth. The teacher's words made me fear God greatly, but did not bring me any closer to Islam.

One day, however, my father took me with him to the mosque for prayers. There a Sheikh said :

«Allah is most Forgiving, most Merciful. He is more forgiving with Moslems, than a mother is with her own children.» Those words made me love God and made me love Islam. I could not, however, reconcil what I had learnt at school about Islam with what I felt about it at the mosque.

At the age of ten, my father threatened to burn me to death, if I were to fail in my examinations.

Gradually I felt that «fear» was beginning to have the upper hand, and that my life itself was controlled by forces difficult to withstand. There was oppression, to use a bold term, and oppression was linked in my mind to religion. School, the street, the Café, and my government Department all helped to feed that feeling of oppression in me, till I finally learned how to be a hypocrite.

I grew up, got married and had children, and came to know life and society better. The lessons I drew from life and society taught me how to become a liar. I grew older, and started to regard hypocrisy as discretion, and lying as caring for others' feelings.

I was gradually losing touch with Islam, just when I thought I was getting to know it in depth. I began to lead a double life : to say one thing but whisper another ; to use one language with people but another among friends.

Today I am related to Islam by that piece of paper left by one of my Grandfathers, a document proving that I descend in a direct line from an Arab Moslem leader ; and that the blood running in my veins is genuine Arab blood.

So I have nothing to fear, have I ?

XI. REPENTANCE IN WEAKNESS

Why do I keep thinking of Laylatul-Qadr (1) these days ? Why do I dwell on repentance ? I simply do not understand.

Laylatul-Qadr flashes through one's life like a transient glaring light, offering the last chance provided by God for his servants to repent.

A Moslem is always telling himself : «I shall not let my last chance slip by. «The last chance, however, always does slip by. and we say to ourselves : «Next year, Laylatul Qadr will be back, God willing.»

Oh, if we were to live long enough and witness a thou-

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(1) «Night of Power» a night in Ramadan, one of the last ten in that month — of which the Quran says : «in it the angels and the Spirit descend». The first verses of the Quran were revealed to Muhammad in it, and there is a popular belief that whoever begs something of God that night, his wish will be granted.

sand such nights ! Laylatul-Qadr is, according to the Quran, better than a thousand months.

There was a time when the back page of our school note-books contained «instructions» to the student such as «Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today» and «Wash your hands before and after meals».

Isn't it strange that our generation has completely discarded such pieces of advice ? Putting off today's work till tomorrow, has become a general rule and typical of the Egyptian character.

For more than twenty years now, I have been telling myself : «On the next Laylatul Qadr, I shall seize the opportunity, return to God and repent.» Every year, however, I have been putting off my repentance to the following year. My life is running out, my soul is growing dimmer and repentance seems to have become more and more like a delusion. Most probably I shall repent when my teeth fall out, my joints suffer rheumatic pains, my eye-sight gets poorer and all my senses fail. I shall repent when I lose the ability to commit sins ! My tardy repentance shall be typically Egyptian I shall say Oh, Lord ! I'll not look at any woman, only when I have lost my keen eye-sight and become incapable of distinguishing the moving figure of a woman walking down the street from that of a jackass drawing a cart !

This kind of repentance is unacceptable. Repentance cannot be real when one is incapable of sinning !

These days I keep on thinking of Laylatul-Qadr. I know that it is the night on which the Quran was sent down. That

means that Laylatul-Qadr was the time when man came in contact through the Quran, with the angels.

This also means that the Quran represents the genuine Laylatul Qadr that is with us all the time. So if we were to know the Quran better each could have his own private Laylatul Qadr.

Like many others, I come into contact with the Quran in a typically Egyptian manner — purely ritualistic. At home we have four copies of the Quran. The first written by a skilled calligrapher on a huge, single sheet, is framed and hung away from everybody's reach ! The second was hand-written in Istambul on highly decorated pages with golden edges. It is kept in a box with a blue velvet cover, and a nice gilt lock. The third, printed in the government press, is placed in a nice book-cover made by my wife, and is kept in her wardobe as a source of blessings (and to prevent thefts). The fourth is a tiny one which I always carry in my suitcase — perhaps it will save my life if an accident takes place, that is, if the car turns over, or if the train is derailed. I never open any of those copies except during Ramadan, when, in Laylatul-Qadr, I read a few verses, feel drowsy, close the book and fall asleep. So the only link between me and the Quran, is that of receiving blessings.

I know that the Quran consists of a number of commands and interdictions which God wants me to observe, publicly and privately.

Nevertheless, I hardly observe those commands and interdictions in the way I observe the commands and interdic-

tions of my superiors at work. I admit that I am more courteous to people than to the Prophet, prayers and peace be upon him, and that I fear people more than Allah, the Almighty, the Most Exalted.

One day, the following hypothetical situation arose in my mind : my boss at work gave me a few orders which I dutifully copied out on a piece of paper, had it framed, and hung it behind my desk at the office. Every morning I read it to him melodiously, in an ecstasy of delight ! Soon enough, however, my boss discovered that I had not carried out any of his orders, He thought that I was only ridiculing him and his instructions. He looked for the first opportunity to give me the sack, and if possible to have me beheaded ! For he gave me his orders to be carried out, and not to be neatly copied, hung or sung !

This funny episode is purely fictional, of course, and it cannot by any stretch of the imagination take place in real life. But it is a parable of our attitude towards Allah, the Almighty, the Most Exalted.

Oh, how vast are the shores of human hypocrisy, and how deep the waters of its oceans !

At work I have three superiors : My immediate boss i.e. the director general ; then the under-secretary of state ; and above him, of course, the minister. I never disobey or argue with any of them, but try to curry favour with each, to the best of my ability !

The director general would say to me : «Oh, the work is being well done these days.»

«We take no credit for it, we owe it to your directives and your wisdom, Sir,» I would answer him.

The under-secretary of State would say to me : «I watched the sun rise in the west !»

«Believe it or not, your excellency, some maintain that it rises in the east ! They are the enemies of your excellency. and every great man has enemies !» — I would answer.

As for the minister, he would tell me nothing, so I would say nothing to him either. In his presence, I would experience a kind of executive terror which precludes all discussion, paralyses my will, and makes my knees shake. I nevertheless always manage to smile so that his excellency may not see a frowning face !

The minister visited our Department two months ago, and spent a whole hour with us during which I did not cease to smile. After his excellency had gone, I found that my facial muscles badly ached !

If any of those three bosses ever asked me to bring him the juice of an ant's ankle, or a hair from a lion's beard, I would do so without delay. Why would I do that ? is it the security of a government job which our forefathers had recommended us to enjoy ? Is it the fear of being fired or the desire to make no trouble ? I do not know for certain, but the three things together may in varying degrees account for my behaviour.

The irony is that while conscious of this, I hardly heed any of Allah's commands ! If a friend of mine were to argue

with me regarding prayer, for instance, I would say : «Oh, Youssef ! I do want to pray ! But praying five times a day is not an easy thing. It is so endless ! the morning prayer, followed by the noon, the afternoon, the evening and night prayers ! I just haven't the time ! I'm so busy !»

Youssef would say : «It's true, my brother. May Allah help you !»

And so people would tell each other «May Allah help you» and might as well add : «to disobey Him !» In fact I am not busy at all, and have nothing serious on my mind ! The five prayers do not take up more than fifteen minutes a day, if one were to perform them unhurriedly, and ten minutes if one rushed. Still, I sit for hours at the café, doing nothing but ogling the women in the street and calling for Allah's blessings on the Prophet !

XII. LAYLATUL-QADR

Tonight is supposed to be Laylatul-Qadr. We do not know for certain, though, on which night of Ramadan it falls. The exact date was kept from us, doubtless for some good reason.

I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to wander in a wilderness, through which an untrodden road stretched. On both sides of that road stood a thousand clock towers. The clocks were all broken, and each was turned into a birds' nest : one holding pigeons ,another kites, a third doves, and a fourth hawks, but not a single nest for eagles.

Complete silence reigned and even the sparrows stopped chirruping, when two angels came down.

The first angel said : «We have collected a goodly number of prayers and wishes .. from people and other beings .. in this Laylatul-Qadr.»

The second angel said : «They are more this year than in any previous year. Let us sort them out before sending them up.»

The first angel said : «O.K.». He, then, began to read out the wishes made by mortals in Laylatul Qadr.

— An old woman said in her prayer :

«O Lord ! rheumatic pains are killing me, and my eyesight is going !

O Lord ! in my day a pound of the best meat cost me a nickel, and a yard of the best material not more than five piastres !

O Lord ! be kind to me, provide me with a nice piece of imported woolen material to save my body and limbs from rheumatic pains !»

— A wife whose husband had unexpectedly shaved his moustache, said in her prayer :

« O Lord ! he was all right until he became «possessed» and turned mad. He believed that without a moustache he would look much younger. O Lord, if he did it for the sake of some woman — a virgin, a divorcee or a widow, bulky as a sofa, or slim as a stick — expose him ! shorten his life ! let him die ; or let me have a moustache, so that I can teach him how to mend his ways and be faithful to me !»

— A Bar-owner said in his prayer :

«O Lord ! Ramadan has been with us too long ! It hasn't been generous to me at all ! For no sooner had the New Moon been sighted than all my customers took to flight !

O Lord ! speed up the waning of the moon of Ramadan .. for I'm getting very poor, and poverty is hard to endure — so that my customers may come back to me to quench their thirst !»

— A donkey brayed :

«O Lord, man has exceeded all limits ! He has been so mean to me ! He abuses me simply for being a donkey. Yet I have been patient and kept on serving him. He rides me on the hottest of days, and still I make no complaint. But man persists in hurting me either by beating me or insulting me. He compares the stupid specimens of his own species to me, although we are cleverer than the cleverest men !

O Lord ! You know him and me only too well !»

— A night thief said in his prayer :

«O Lord ! Blind the eyes of the government, so that I won't be seen. Give the government a hard time, for what it is doing to me !

O Lord ! Give me keen eye-sight at night, and whenever a policeman wakes up, let him fall asleep again !

O Lord ! keep me out of prison ; let the strongest of locks open easily in my hands !

O Lord ! show me in broad day-light the safes of those among your servants, who steal from the wretched but honest people !»

— A miserable dog barked :

«O Lord ! again they are chasing me in the streets !

They want to kill me with their old-fashioned guns, and other 'animal killers' ! Have I done anything wrong ? These men are more ruthless than beasts in a jungle ! Do they hate me for protecting their property at night ? I have always been known for the best qualities, particularly fidelity.

O Lord ! reduce those people to dogs, give them a taste of the torture they inflict on me ! For only then could they realize their shame and stop chasing me ! And only then could those who are unfair to me learn how the tables may be turned !»

— An ant said in prayer :

«O Lord ! Your servants have grown more careful than we. They now lock their food in airtight containers ! How can a poor ant find the sugar ?

O. Lord ! inspire them to keep them open so that no ant may starve !»

An alley cat who had earlier lived in luxury mewed :

«O Lord ! wreak vengeance on those insipid journalists who pretend to know when they don't. They claim that we, cats, communicate diseases to children which made people turn us out of their homes !

O Lord ! make journalists live longer ! May they earn a good deal of money .. especially in hard currency ! Their ideas will then get better, their reports will improve, and they will perhaps stop troubling us !»

— A civil servant who had a dozen children said in his prayer :

«O Lord ! I need not tell you that the new increment is overdue, my last month's salary is already spent, and that my chidren and wife have lost all patience. My wife now lours, now roars with rage, and often swears herself hoarse !

O Lord ! give me the increment ! Make me extremely tactful with my superiors !»

— A student in love said in his prayer :

O Lord ! let me pass the examinations ; make Kawsar, Suliman Effendi's daughter, love me ; give my father the increment he dreams of : make my eldest sister Ihsan, get married to a humble rich husband as my mother always says in her prayers !»

The first angel said to the second :

«Which of these wishes are we to send up ?»

«The animals'.»

«And the rest ?»

«Throw them in the waste-paper basket !»

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